

Planting the Seeds: Historical Trauma and the Influence of Culture on Resilience, Hope, and Wellness

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Alaska Native Peoples have experienced tremendous change, cultural decimation, and profound upheaval through contact and colonization. These changes have included disease, land dispossession, exploitation of resources, loss of spiritual and family practices, and an imposed governance and education system. These collective experiences have resulted in trauma experienced broadly among individuals, communities, and generations. The impact of this trauma on individuals and communities can result in internal stress, self-imposed isolation or addiction, and a general lack of engagement or contribution to the community.

To address underlying trauma, LaVerne's presentation explored the influence of strong culture on resilience, hope, and wellness. Honoring the strength and resilience within yourself, community, and culture is a way to move forward into healing and wellness. Healing and wellness influence a community's capacity to have difficult conversations and make challenging decisions. This capacity is all the more important when facing challenges like climate change with resilience. LaVerne shared the following strategies for building resilience that are rooted in strong culture:

- Honor relationality - Relationality is to understand what relationships are important and valued for the people and communities you work with. Strive to see and draw connections with the people and the natural world. Honor and call attention to the reciprocal relationships we are in, rather than disconnecting to protect ourselves from the trauma we may be managing.
- Highlight and build on strengths - Recognize and acknowledge the strengths in one another. Focus on the positive contribution of individuals and groups in the community.
- Create feelings of safety and construct safe spaces - Ask yourself, as a community member and leader, "How do I or we create safe spaces to have hard and needed conversations?"
- Share self-regulation and co-regulation tools - Seek tranquility or inner peace. Self-regulation is using skills to help calm your nervous system such as deep breathing, walking, or reflective thought, like meditation. Co-regulation is when we help others calm their nerves by the way we relate to them and the activities we do together. In order to have calmness on the outside, there has to be calmness internally. Watch for signs from the animals or natural world, like *The Quiet Duck*, which is a story of noticing the duck nestled and asleep in the middle turning lane of a busy city street. This duck chose to trust and to take care of itself, right where it was, even amidst all the noise.
- Start from a place of ancestral knowledge and values - Maintain, strengthen, or intentionally re-introduce traditional practices and knowledge in daily life.

Trauma disconnects us from these circles. How can we rebuild connections?



To heal trauma and disruption, nurture the Five C's in your work:

Compassion, Curiosity, Connection, Community, Ceremony

How do these play out in the work that you do?



Compassion -

The practice of compassion and love are often missing or underused in daily work. When the impacts of trauma on the brain, body, and behavior are understood, it is easier to have more compassion and patience, which builds a sense of safety and trust. Love is an essential part of that process. Indigenous Elders often show a deep love for people, even if they don't know them. Including Elders in public events and spaces like classrooms can have a significant impact. Elders can express love and care, and that can transform a group or experience. Self-compassion and self-love are something to learn and may require time. The more we learn to do this, the more patience we have. Once learned, we can even extend that compassion to others and to the land.

Curiosity -

People are constantly learning and asking questions. It is easy to focus on the negative by asking, what's wrong with you. Try instead to ask, what's *strong* with you? This can be done with a sense of curiosity. Curiosity is about understanding the whole person; individuals are multifaceted and complex human beings, who are influenced by the world, including the past, the present, and the future. We have to be critical thinkers and explorers as we work toward healing and wellness with individuals and communities. Elders often highlight the importance of education and lifelong learning, which is important for this process.

Connection -

All of the social challenges we face, like addiction, anxiety, anger, fear or suicide, create disconnection in our lives and in our world. With trauma, we often pull away from our families, communities, our culture, our bodies, and ourselves. We numb ourselves in order to not experience grief or loss. For Indigenous people the health of the land is connected to the health of the people, and conversely the health of the people is intertwined and significantly connected to the health of the land. There is a lot of disconnection in the challenges we and the earth are facing today. People are not at the table because they do not have a relationship with the natural world. How do we begin to help people connect to one another and the land?

Community -

When Elders talked about community, there was a beauty about it. They talked about going feeling together and all the times they would get together for different reasons. Elders want to continue bringing the community together. Healing happens within relationships.

Ceremony-

Wilson Justin, a prominent Elder from the Ahtna region, said Indigenous people would not be here today without ceremony in our lives. Ceremony helped us stay in balance, and connected us to spirit, bringing us together, even in grief. Dealing with intense emotions is difficult but can be learned. Self-regulation and co-regulation practices can help regulate our emotions and bring us back into balance that enhances self-awareness, self-care, and community-care. Ceremony links us to spirit, our ancestors, and generations coming. We can incorporate ceremony in multiple ways and all types of work.